

## *Update from the Department of Early Learning February 2011*

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### **DIRECTOR'S NOTE**

As we enter month two of the 2011 legislative session, there is plenty of conversation around early learning. First, the Working Connections Child Care subsidy eligibility changes that were slated to take effect on Feb. 1 will not. While we still have to finalize the details of how to implement the new changes, some pieces are already in place. Please read the story below for details, and continue to visit [www.del.wa.gov](http://www.del.wa.gov) for the latest updates.

DEL has been before several committees to present (and brag) about our Early Support for Infants and Toddlers Program (ESIT); Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP); our strong partnership with Thrive by Five Washington and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction; and more. You can find the PowerPoint presentation from our agency presentations—along with legislative briefing papers and other updates—on the Government Relations section of our website by clicking on “State Legislature.”

Governor Chris Gregoire on Feb. 2 testified before the Senate Early Learning & K-12 Education Committee on Senate Bill 5639, her proposal to create a student-focused state Department of Education to bring together the various state entities that oversee education in Washington. It was the beginning of what will be a fascinating and important conversation about how to help ensure all children cradle to career succeed in school. You can find more about this proposal on the Governor’s website at [www.governor.wa.gov](http://www.governor.wa.gov).

Also this session, there is focus on licensed child care—what is working well and what can be improved. This is in part thanks to our licensing report we delivered to the Legislature in December: ([www.del.wa.gov/government/legislature/reports.aspx](http://www.del.wa.gov/government/legislature/reports.aspx)). I have had many good conversations with legislators about how to help ensure children in licensed child care are safe, healthy and *learning*. Those three elements are equally important in child care.

Thanks to all of our partners who are helping paint the picture of how important early learning is even in these tough economic times.

—Bette Hyde, Director

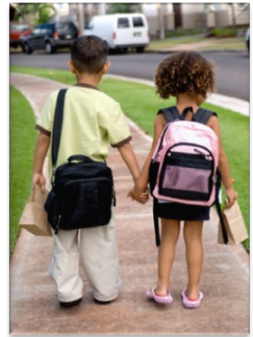
### **Working Connections Child Care subsidy changes began Feb .1**

Eligibility changes for the Working Connections Child Care (WCCC) program did not go into effect on February 1, but instead, families will see higher copayments and potential waiting lists.

New eligibility rules were planned for today due to budget shortfalls and caseload increases. However, a new agreement will keep families with incomes up to 175 percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines (FPG) eligible for the program, but increase their out-of-pocket costs.

#### **Effective February 1, 2011, through February 28, 2011:**

- Families with incomes above 82 percent of the FPG to 137.5 percent will have copayments increase from \$50 to \$60 per month.
- Families with incomes above 137.5 percent of the FPG through 175 percent will have monthly copayments increase using a sliding scale.



## New phase of MERIT launched

*More than 800 new profiles, 730 new STARS ID numbers assigned in less than a week*

New users jumped on the recently released MERIT features last week, creating new online profiles to track their State Training and Registry System (STARS) histories and getting new STARS ID numbers if needed.

The Managed Education and Registry Information Tool (MERIT) is the statewide online training database for early learning professionals. DEL staff report that most user questions are centered on learning the system, including how to search for themselves on MERIT and resetting passwords because of old e-mail addresses

MERIT Statistic (as of Jan. 31, 2011)	Count
Education verification applications submitted	274
New accounts	806
New STARS IDs assigned	736
Number of distinct logins	1,444

Staff are also restating to users: “Be patient.” The new MERIT release allows trainers and organizations to record training histories, but they haven’t been able to do this since April. Trainers need time to enter the old information.

The majority of MERIT users are inputting employment history and education. Learning the new MERIT features will take time, but the launch is an exciting milestone for the system. E-mail [merit@del.wa.gov](mailto:merit@del.wa.gov) with questions.

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### “Working Connections” continued from page 1

#### Effective March 1, 2011:

- Families with incomes above 82 percent of the FPG to 137.5 percent will have copayments increase to \$65 per month.
- Families with incomes above 137.5 percent of the FPG through 175 percent will have monthly copayments increase using a sliding scale.

There will be no copayment change for families with incomes at or below 82 percent of the FPG. Their payments remain \$15 a month.

Another change will allow only licensed or certified family home child care providers to be eligible for field trip fee reimbursements for children in subsidized care. Child care centers and school-age centers will not be eligible for field trip fees.

About 37,400 families use the WCCC program a month to help pay for child care while they work or meet WorkFirst participation requirements. DEL is working with partners to determine how best to implement the new agreements to support families while achieving needed cost savings. Certain families may be placed on a waiting list to receive help. The extent of this waiting list is unclear until it is determined how many families exit the program.

More information will be shared as it is available and posted on our WCCC web page: [www.del.wa.gov/care/help/connections.aspx](http://www.del.wa.gov/care/help/connections.aspx)

## Infant/toddler regions complete service plans, attend statewide meeting

DEL and partners are building a regional system in which communities help improve the quality of infants and toddler care using consultation services and partnerships. Last year DEL selected 10 regional groups to collect data and create service plans that included:

- priority infant/toddler consultation strategies for child care providers and families
- partnerships to support the strategies
- outcomes for their communities

These plans were due Jan. 31, 2011. All 10 regions will meet Feb. 8 to discuss how to use the collected data, the community's needs and their priority strategies to make the biggest impact on quality of care for infants and toddlers.

By July 2011, DEL expects to have new regional infant/toddler consultation contracts in place. This work is part of larger efforts around improving the quality of care for infant and toddlers, including strategies such as creating statewide core competencies for those who care for young children. For more information, visit [www.del.wa.gov/partnerships/infant/](http://www.del.wa.gov/partnerships/infant/)



## ESIT improvement projects move forward with visitors from North Carolina, California

Last month, the Early Support for Infants and Toddlers (ESIT) program hosted a three-day series of meetings with national and regional technical assistance and training experts from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina, the Western Regional Resource Center in Portland and the Early Childhood Outcomes Center in California. These meetings focused on alignment ongoing ESIT projects including:

- A cost study on how federal dollars are used
- Improvements to ESIT's data management system and statewide training
- An 18-month System Improvement Project made possible by one-time American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funds

These projects are helping improve how Washington meets the needs of families with very young children with delays or disabilities. For more information, visit [www.del.wa.gov/esit](http://www.del.wa.gov/esit)

## Fingerprint process updates

On February 1, DEL began a new electronic fingerprint process with a business called L-1 Enrollment Services to reduce time and errors. Applicants will no longer submit fingerprint cards and associated fees to DEL. The licensee will pay for the applicant's fingerprint by:

- E-check from saving or checking account
- Credit or debit card
- L-1 Enrollment Services preapproved escrow account

To clarify, the applicant and the licensee DO NOT need to attend the fingerprint appointment together.

For more information, visit [www.del.wa.gov/requirements/new/background.aspx](http://www.del.wa.gov/requirements/new/background.aspx)

*DEL is sharing this information on behalf of our partners at the Department of Commerce*

It's that time of the year again – tax season. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a national program that helps low to moderate income working families and individuals by reducing their federal income tax burden. This year families can receive up to \$5,666 cash back but they must file and claim the EITC to get this benefit. Individuals and families can also get fast, free tax preparation and claim the EITC at a Free Tax Preparation Center. Call 2-1-1 to find the Free Tax Preparation Center nearest you and what you'll need to bring.

Last year, EITC refunds put more than \$800 million dollars into Washington citizens' pockets and benefited more than 425,000 working families and individuals.

- Call **2-1-1 Information and Referral** (ask for free tax prep)
- or
- File by yourself at [www.icanefile.org](http://www.icanefile.org)

## If you have five minutes...

Listen to DEL Director Bob Hamilton discuss preliminary data from our kindergarten readiness process WaKIDS on KPLU radio:

[www.kplu.org/post/many-washington-kids-not-ready-kindergarten#](http://www.kplu.org/post/many-washington-kids-not-ready-kindergarten#)

Check out more about WaKIDS at [www.del.wa.gov/wakids](http://www.del.wa.gov/wakids)



## Quick clarification: Child Care Check improvements

In last month's newsletter explained several updates to Child Care Check, the online tool that parents and others can use to find information on a child care provider's licensing history.

One of those changes, finding a list of providers based on zip code radius and type of facility, can be found in the *advanced* search feature. This might not have been obvious to users.

Child Care Check is just one step to finding child care in a community. Families can first find licensed child care options by contacting the Washington State Child Care Resource & Referral Network ([www.childcarenet.org](http://www.childcarenet.org)), then using Child Care Check to look at a child care provider's licensing history. The Resource & Referral Network has more detailed information about hours, costs and special accommodations in a specific facility that is not available on Child Care Check.